CHAPTER FIVE

Explaining Evil in Late Antiquity

PLOTINUS AND HIS CRITICS

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The question "Where do evils come from?" is one of the major issues—almost an obsession—which we encounter in the writings of philosophers and religious thinkers of the Greco-Roman world between the third and sixth centuries AD.[1] There were plenty of good reasons for this concern. Already, on the level of daily life, these thinkers lived in a world traversed by tremendous forces that threatened the normal order of existence with chaos, collapse, and destruction. Having enjoyed relative peace and prosperity in the second century, the Roman Empire was shaken by a series of crises in the third century from which it never really recovered. Persistent internal political strife was matched by the permanent threat of invasion and destruction coming from outside the empire's borders. Two highly symbolic events

1 I am grateful to Eyjólfur Emilsson and an anonymous referee, who have helped me clarify and strengthen some points made in this chapter.

might be mentioned in this connection: the destruction of Athens by the Heruli in 267–268 and the sack of Rome by Goths in 410. Political turmoil and military insecurity also meant economic difficulties and decline, all of this ultimately leading, despite sporadic attempts to reverse the trend, to an empire reduced to its eastern part, truncated of its western, North African, Egyptian, and Palestinian provinces, centered on Constantinople, at the end of the seventh century. To the list of troubles we might add recurrent plague in the third century and natural catastrophes such as the earthquakes which struck Antioch in 115, Crete in 365, and Antioch again in 526. The upheavals of the period were also moral and spiritual. The old Roman religious and political order had to integrate powerful religious movements coming from the east: Manicheism, a profusion of Gnostic movements, Christianity. At first Christianity had to be checked, then it was tolerated, and finally institutionalized, while going through, itself, a series of terrible crises and centuries of internal strife.

For the philosophers, the question of the origin of evils had arisen earlier,[2] in the context of polemics between the philosophical schools, in particular on the subject of Stoic cosmology. If, as the Stoics maintained, the world is completely structured and entirely directed by an immanent divine force which is rational and good, then there seems to be no way of explaining the origin of evils. Far from accepting the criticism that their philosophy failed to account for evil, the Stoics claimed that everything and every event in the world is good and for the best, while they restricted evil to the moral domain, describing it as false judgment.[3] By the end of the third century AD, the various

2 The question is raised by philosophers of the first and second centuries such as Plutarch and Numenius.

3 See Numenius, fragment 52, lines 48–49 in *Numénius Fragments*, trans. Edouard Des Places (Paris: Les Belles Lettres [with Greek text], 1973), 96, on which see *Plotin Traité 51* (I, 8), trans. with commentary by Dominic O'Meara (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1999), 91. On the Stoic theory of evil, see Anthony Long, "The Stoic Concept of Evil," *Philosophical Quarterly* 18 (1968): 329–342; George Kerferd, "The Origin of Evil in Stoic Thought," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 60 (1978): 482–494.

philosophical schools of the Hellenistic period had largely disappeared, their ideas being to some extent absorbed by the school that was to become dominant up to the sixth century, Platonism. Platonism emphasized, in opposition to the Stoics, the transcendence of the divine cause of all things. However, since the Platonists followed Plato's principle that the divine is good and cannot be the cause of evils,[4] and since, for them, the divine is also the cause of everything, they too had to face, like the Stoics before them, the problem of explaining the origin of evils. When Christian theologians developed a conception of god largely inspired by Platonism, a god who is absolutely good and the cause of no evil, the god who is the creator of all things of the Bible, they also had to face the same problem.

Two figures emerged in these debates in late antiquity whose contributions were to be of major historical importance: Augustine in the Latin west, and Proclus in the Greek-speaking east. The Christian Augustine is known for having described evil as the "privation of the good" (*privatio boni*), which he found in particular in a perverse choice made by rational creatures (angels and humans) who preferred lesser goods to the absolute Good that is God.[5] Proclus, head of the (pagan) Platonist school in Athens in 437–485 AD, discussed the problem of evil in a number of works, in particular in a treatise *On the Existence of Evils*, in which he described evils as the heterogeneous side-effects of a hierarchically differentiated reality which is good.[6] Proclus's treatise was paraphrased not longer afterward by a Christian author, who identified himself (falsely) as Dionysius the Areopagite, in a work *On the Divine Names*.[7] The works of Dionysius were presented to the French king in 827 and were soon translated into Latin, in particular

4 Plato, *Republic* 379bc.

5 For a discussion of Augustine's conception of evil, see Peter King's chapter in the present volume.

6 Proclus, *Proclus on the Existence of Evils*, trans. Jan Opsomer and Carlos Steel (London: Duckworth, 2003).

7 Carlos Steel, "Proclus et Denys: De l'existence du mal," in *Denys l'Aréopagite et sa postérité en Orient et en Occident*, edited by Ysabel de Andia (Paris: Institut d'études Augustiniennes, 1997), 89–116.

by John Scotus Eriugena. This hidden presence in the Latin west of Proclus's work on the existence of evils was strengthened by Guillaume de Moerbeke's Latin translation of Proclus's treatise in 1280. Both texts (Dionysius and Proclus) were to become fundamental sources of inspiration, together with Augustine, in medieval and even post-medieval western discussions of the problem of evil.[8]

Behind these two extremely influential figures we find another: that of Plotinus. Plotinus (205–270 AD) is largely responsible, intellectually, for the revival of Platonism in late antiquity. It was in reading works of Plotinus and of Plotinus's pupil Porphyry that Augustine found solutions to problems that obsessed him, among which was the question of the origin of evil,[9] thus preparing the way for his conversion from Manicheism to Christianity in 386. It is commonly thought that he found his solution (evil as the privation of the good) in Plotinus. However, notwithstanding some areas of agreement, we will see later that Plotinus and Augustine profoundly disagree in their analysis of evil. Although regarding himself as the intellectual successor of Plotinus, Proclus found Plotinus's theory of evil utterly wrong. His tractate *On the Existence of Evils* is to a considerable extent a critical rejection of Plotinus's text *On What Are and Whence Come Evils* (*Ennead* I, 8), and Proclus pursues the polemic elsewhere in his works.[10] Plotinus's theory of evil thus emerges, in relation to Augustine and Proclus, as both important and inacceptable. His theory is so challenging and problematic that, even today, it provokes rejection or compromising misinterpretation in its readers.

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8 On the use of Proclus's text by Leibniz, see Werner Beierwaltes, *Denken des Einen* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1985), 72, n. 105.

9 Augustine, *Confessions* III, 7, 12; VII, 3, 4–5; 5, 7; 7, 11; 20, 26.

10 See *Plotin Traité 51 (I, 8)*, trans. O'Meara, 30–31; I also discuss there (pp. 90–91) the question of the title of Plotinus's treatise, which was not given by Plotinus himself. For Proclus's polemic against Plotinus see further Jan Opsomer, "Proclus vs Plotinus on Matter (*De mal. Subs*. 30–7)," *Phronesis* 46 (2001): 154–188; and Opsomer, "Some Problems with Plotinus' Theory of Matter/Evil. An Ancient Debate Continued," *Quaestio* 7 (2007): 165–189.

In the following I would like to first (1) present the essentials of Plotinus's theory of evil, as found in *On What Are and Whence Come Evils*, also taking into account other places in the *Enneads* where evil is discussed. I would like to then (2) explore some of the difficulties that Plotinus's ancient and modern critics have found in his theory and the solutions that might be proposed to these difficulties. Finally (3), I would like to suggest that Plotinus's theory presents certain advantages, as an analysis of evil, in comparison to the approaches of an Augustine or a Proclus: Plotinus does not make rational agents, like ourselves, bear the entire weight of responsibility for evil, nor does he minimize evil, thinking it away into the margins of a reality where all that exists is good.

1. The Theory

Referring at the beginning of his text to those who enquire "where do evils come from?"[11] Plotinus suggests that they would do well to ask first "what is evil and the nature of evil?" (*Ennead* I, 8, 1, 1–4). His point would seem reasonable enough. Following Plato's Socrates, we might say that we need to think about *what* we are talking about, before we can come to discussing other questions relating to it. However, the comparison with Plato's Socrates immediately raises a difficult issue. If in Plato's *Republic*, for example, we need to know what justice is, if we are to see if justice is beneficial, do we not assume, as Plato seems to do, that "justice" is something, some nature answering to the question "what is it"? Is this not to assume too much? And even if we assume this in the case of things like justice, can we assume it also in the case of "evil"? Is it not already an unjustified assumption to think that there is such a thing as "evil," or the "nature" of evil? Proclus, in his

11 I am indebted here to the most important study of Plotinus's theory of evil—namely, Denis O'Brien, "Plotinus on Evil," in *Le Néoplatonisme. Colloques internationaux du CNRS*, edited by Pierre-Maxime Schuhl and Pierre Hadot (Paris: CNRS, 1971), 113–146.

criticism of Plotinus, rejects this assumption: there is no nature of evil, common to and the cause of evils. Instead of talking about "evil," we should talk about a wide range of heterogeneous phenomena which we call "evils."[12] There is no metaphysical singular, "evil itself," behind the grammatical singular "evil." To avoid slipping from the latter to the former, it would be better to keep, as Proclus does, to the grammatical plural, "evils." I will come back to Proclus's criticism below. For the moment it is of use in alerting us to the question whether Plotinus is making certain ontological assumptions before coming to the answers he wishes to propose.

Plotinus continues, at the beginning of his text, by pointing to various other questions concerning evil, in particular the question how evil can be known: if knowledge relates to objects which are determinate forms, how could we have a representation of evil as a form, if evil seems to be found in the absence (*apousia*) of all goodness or form (1, 9–12)? Evil would then be unthinkable, not the sort of determinate object that can be thought. But if evil is the opposite of the good, and we can know the good, might we, in knowing the good, be able to know its opposite? But in what way is the good the "opposite" of evil (1, 12–20)?

In the following two chapters, Plotinus attempts to sketch a "notion" (*ennoia* 3, 12) of evil by taking its opposite, the good, describing "the nature of the good" (2, 1) to the extent that is appropriate. To do this, Plotinus refers in a summary fashion to the primary metaphysical principles, as he sees them. In the realm of the good are included (i) the absolutely primary, transcendent, ineffable principle, the One, the absolute Good, as well as the principles derived from the One, (ii) transcendent Intellect (*nous*), and (iii) Soul. The aspects of these principles which Plotinus emphasizes, in considering them to represent the nature of the good, are being the object of all desire, being

12 Proclus, *On the Existence of Evils*, chap. 47; Opsomer, "Proclus vs Plotinus," 160–161.

self–sufficient, deficient or lacking in nothing, being the measure and limit of all things. These features characterize in the first place the first principle (2, 2–5), which confers them on Intellect and the Soul. There is thus, among metaphysical first principles, a hierarchy of the good—primary, secondary and tertiary—a "divine life" in which there is no evil (2, 25–28).

If the nature of the good can be described in this way, then a "notion" of evil might be reached by negation of the features characterizing the good, such that evil could then be conceived as what would be

> non-measure (*ametria*) in relation to measure, unlimited in relation to limit, the formless in relation to that which makes form, what is always deficient in relation to the self-sufficient, always indeterminate, in no way stable, receiving all affects, insatiable, total indigence (3, 12–16, my trans.).

Plotinus then distinguishes, in this notion of evil, between that which would have these features as characterizing it in its very "essence" ("so to speak," *hoion*, Plotinus says, 3, 17), and that which would not be essentially evil in this sense, but would *become* evil by receiving evil, as if an accident added to its nature, from what is essentially evil (3, 16–20).

There is indeed, for Plotinus, a reality which corresponds to the notion of evil thus reached. It is matter (3, 30–40), matter understood as the very last and lowest level of the derivation of reality from the One, as that which is totally lacking in any form or determination and which cannot be determined or formed in any way (it is not Aristotelian matter[13]), a sort of impenetrable "darkness" underlying the appearance of the physical world as an expression of the goodness of the higher, metaphysical principles. The identification of matter as absolute evil

13 For Plotinus's rejection of an Aristotelian view of matter as something that can be qualified or determined in some way, see *Enneads* II, 4, 14–16; III, 6, 7–10 and the comments by Paul Kalligas in his *The Enneads of Plotinus: A Commentary*, vol. I. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 328–329, 538.

had already been made by Plotinus in texts he had composed before I, 8, in *Ennead* II, 4, 16, 16–24, and in *Ennead* III, 6, 11, 27–45.

Since there is, in Plotinus's universe, something corresponding to the notion we can have of evil, i.e., matter, and since matter, according to this notion, is evil in and of itself, and there are other realities which become evil even if they are not in and of themselves evil, then, Plotinus holds, matter is the cause of these other realities becoming evil. This he describes in chapters 3–4 of *Ennead* I, 8, and I will come back to this subject in more detail below. He distinguishes the realities which become evil into (1) bodies which suffer evil (e.g., disease and destruction) and (2) souls which can become morally bad. Physical and moral evils are the secondary manifestations of evil which come about in connection with the primary evil which is matter. (1) Bodies come to be as forms which appear in matter. Matter as that which has no measure or determination brings about the imperfection of bodies, their deficiency and disorder, their permanent instability, evanescence, and destruction (4, 1–5; 5, 19–26). (2) Souls also become evil in relation to matter. Plotinus believes that soul, in its nature, is "divine," i.e., it is essentially good (4, 5–6). If it becomes morally evil, this happens in its relation through body to matter (4, 15–17). Soul's relation to body does not necessarily entail moral evil in soul, but it might lead to this, given the presence of matter to soul and the possibility this gives for soul to be influenced by this presence. Plotinus does not hold that every soul becomes evil in its relation to body, nor that every part of soul becomes evil. If, however, what is irrational in soul is affected by the measurelessness of matter, this shows itself in soul as unmeasured affects (*pathêmata*), desires and impulses, the vices of injustice, immoderation, cowardice (4, 8–12). The rational aspect of soul can be limited and hindered by the in-determination of matter (reasoning requires determinate objects) to the point of being incapacitated and made blind by the darkness of matter (4, 17–5, 19; see 13, 18–21). Thus it is due to the presence of matter, and in relation to matter, that physical and moral evils come about.

Plotinus concludes the sketch of his theory of evil with words which indicate the ideas about the origin of evils which his theory wishes to exclude:

> If these things are correctly said, then *we* (*hêmas*) must not be supposed to be the cause (*archê*) of evils as being evil by and from ourselves; evils are prior to us, and those that take hold on humans do not do so with their willing this, but there is an escape from the evils in the soul, for those who are able; but not all are able. Though there is matter present in the visible gods [i.e., the stars], evil is not there, nor the vice which humans have (and not even all humans); the visible gods master matter and master it by that which in them is not enmattered. But the gods in which there is no matter are superior. (5, 26–34)[14]

Plotinus thus rejects two theses: that we (humans) are the cause of evils and that the stars are the cause of evils. The first thesis could be taken to be that of the Stoics, who restricted evils to erroneous judgements made by human rational agents, but it more probably concerns Gnostic theories about rational beings which, in a perverse choice, turn away from God and thus create evil. Plotinus criticized such theories in his polemic with Gnosticism in *Ennead* II, 9, 12, 35–44. These Gnostics appear to have been Christians, and one could say that Plotinus also rejects thereby the Christian account of evil as originating in a perverse choice in rational creatures which we find in Augustine and, before Augustine, in Origen. The second thesis rejected by Plotinus is that of the astrologers, who find the cause of evils in the stars: Plotinus attacks this position of the astrologers at greater length in the text he wrote after *Ennead* I, 8, *Ennead* II, 3. Here, in I, 8, Plotinus asserts simply that, even if matter is present in the stars,

14 Armstrong's trans., *Plotinus*, slightly modified, which I also use in the following.

it is entirely mastered by the divine and so causes no evil. By implication, matter in the lower regions of the physical world is not entirely mastered by form and it is in these regions, the regions of "mortal nature," that evils "circulate."[15]

2. Problems and Objections

The rest of *Ennead* I, 8 is largely devoted to dealing with problems and objections relating to the theory sketched in chapters 2–5. I propose to look at some of these problems and objections in the larger context of the criticisms of the theory we find in Plotinus's ancient readers, in particular in Proclus, and in his modern interpreters. This will provide an occasion for deepening the account given in chapters 2–5, in particular as concerns the explanation of moral evil, while testing the strength and limits of Plotinus's theory. One could divide the criticisms of Plotinus's theory into those which are internal to ancient Platonism, where a common metaphysical context is assumed, and those external to Platonism, where there is no such common ground. However, even in exploring criticisms internal to Platonism, we will find ideas which are of a more general interest in the discussion of the problem of evil.

2.1. Problem 1

An evident problem in Plotinus's theory of evil is the seeming contradiction between his claim that everything, including matter, derives from the absolute Good (the One) and his identification of matter as absolute evil: How can the absolute Good produce absolute evil? This difficulty has brought some modern interpreters to the conclusion that Plotinus's theory is incoherent. Other interpreters avoid the difficulty by denying that he identifies matter as absolute evil or by denying that

15 I, 8, 6, 3: Plotinus is quoting here a passage from Plato's *Theaetetus* (176a), of which his theory provides an interpretation.

he holds that matter derives from the Good. However we have seen that the second option is excluded by Plotinus's text, and we will soon see that the third option is also excluded.[16] It seems then that the first option—to admit that the theory is incoherent—is the only option left to us. But why precisely is it incoherent to say that the absolute Good produces (even if through a series of intermediary steps) absolute evil? I believe that we need to look more closely at the reasons that would show this incoherence.

The argument that Plotinus cannot claim both that the absolute Good produces everything and that matter is absolute evil was formulated by Proclus, in his critique of Plotinus's theory of evil. Proclus's argument has the merit of being sufficiently precise and explicit to allow us to focus more sharply on the nature of the incoherence being attributed to Plotinus. Of course, there may be other ways of formulating this incoherence, but they would also need to be made explicit. Proclus's formulation of the incoherence might serve then as an illustration of the sort of thing that might happen, if we are not to be satisfied with the surface appearance of incoherence (the Good causes everything including matter/matter is absolute evil) and to look more carefully at that of which the incoherence consists.

Proclus's argument runs as follows:

> But if matter is evil . . . we must choose between two alternatives: either to make the Good the cause of evil, or to posit two principles of beings.[17]

Neither Plotinus nor Proclus can accept the postulate of two independent principles, a cause of good and a cause of evil, a dualistic position such as that of the Manicheans who had such influence on

16 See Denis O'Brien, *Plotinus on the Origin of Matter* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1991) for a full critical discussion of modern interpretations which deny that matter derives from the Good in Plotinus.

17 Proclus, *Proclus on the Existence of Evils*, chap. 31.

Augustine before his conversion. Sharing with him the postulate that there is just one ultimate principle of all things, the Good, Plotinus, Proclus argues, must either give up the claim that matter is evil, or say that the Good is the cause of evil. Since the latter claim cannot be maintained, Proclus affirms, Plotinus must abandon his thesis that matter is evil.[18] The claim that the Good is the cause of evil cannot be maintained, in Proclus's view, for the following reasons:

> Nor does evil stem from the Good. For just as the cause of good things is good in a greater degree, likewise that which generates evil will be evil to a greater degree. Neither would the Good maintain its own nature, if it produced the principle of evil. If, on the other hand, it is a general rule that what is generated likes to assimilate itself to its generating principle, even evil itself will be good, having been made good by participation in its cause. Hence the Good, as the cause of evil, would be evil, and evil, as being produced from the Good, would be good.[19]

According to this argument, then, Plotinus's position leads to two absurdities: (a) that the Good, as the cause of evil, will be evil, and even more evil than absolute evil; (b) and that absolute evil will be good, as produced by the Good. Faced with this double absurdity, Plotinus must abandon his position that matter is evil. The double absurdity is generated by Proclus as follows.

(a) The Good, as the cause of evil, must be even more evil than it, by application of a general principle that, in a genus, the cause of a property common to members of the genus has this property to a

18 I analyse the following argument in Proclus in more detail in Dominic O'Meara, "The Metaphysics of Evil in Plotinus: Problems and Solutions," in *Agonistes: Essays in Honour of Denis O'Brien*, edited by John Dillon and Monique Dixsaut (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 179–185, esp. 183–185.

19 Proclus, *Proclus on the Existence of Evils*, chap. 31.

greater extent than the other members of the genus.[20] For example, fire has heat to a greater degree that the heat it produces in others. So the Good must be evil, and even more evil than the (absolute) evil it produces. However, I suggest that, for all its surface cleverness, Proclus's argument does not apply. Matter is indeed, as we will see below, the last term of a series of realities deriving from the Good. The prior terms of the series represent degrees in goodness, power and unity of which the highest degree is found in the cause of the series, the Good. However matter, as the last term of the series, is that which is entirely lacking in any goodness (this is, as we will see, what makes it the last term): it does not share in any goodness with any of the prior terms of the series. It thus has no determinate property, shared with other members of the series, which the Good would possess to the highest degree.[21]

(b) For the same reason, Plotinus need not admit that matter will become good by participating in its cause, the Good, and hence no longer be absolute evil: it is of the essence of matter not to be able to participate in any determinate property, in any goodness, and so it will not become good in virtue of having the Good as its ultimate cause.

From this it follows that the double absurdity (that the Good becomes evil, and that evil becomes good) which Proclus attributes to Plotinus does not apply, if we pay attention to Plotinus's theory. It thus

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20 This "genus" is not an Aristotelian genus, in which species are subsumed, but what A. Lloyd has called a "quasi-genus" (or "P-series"). Antony Lloyd, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

21 Opsomer (in *Problems with Plotinus' Theory*, 179–180) rejects my criticism (in *Metaphysics of Evil*) of Proclus, since he appears to think that evil, for Plotinus, is a "characteristic" or "quasi-property," and so will be possessed by the cause of matter, the One, to a higher degree. Matter for Plotinus, he says, "is not just the complete lack of goodness, but something worse: it is evil." This is, however, a travesty of Plotinus's position, for whom, as we have seen, the *notion* of evil, in the absolute, involves the negation of all goodness; matter corresponds to this notion since, although existing, it has, and can receive, absolutely no property, characteristic, or determination (i.e., goodness) whatever. Matter, as Plotinus conceives of it, is, *pace* Opsomer, just the complete lack of goodness, not something worse: there can be nothing worse than the complete lack of goodness.

seems that Plotinus can continue to hold both that the Good produces matter and that matter is evil: the logical incoherence of maintaining both of these claims has not been shown, at least in Proclus's particular formulation of this incoherence.

2.2. Problem 2

If it is logically possible that the Good produces evil, is it necessary? In *Ennead* I, 8, chap. 7, Plotinus offers two arguments designed to show the necessity of evil. The first argument concerns the necessity of matter for the constitution of the material world. The world must be constituted of opposites: it is a mix "of intelligence and necessity." Plotinus is quoting here Plato's *Timaeus* (47e–48a) and he identifies intelligence (god) as the source of good and necessity (matter) as the source of evils (7, 1–7). Thus, as a Platonist, Plotinus finds authority for his identification of matter with evil in Plato's cosmology.

Later in the chapter Plotinus offers a second argument showing the necessity of evil, an argument which I would like to examine in more detail. The second argument demonstrates both that the Good produces matter and that matter is absolute evil. In examining this argument, we will also have the opportunity of considering in more detail Plotinus's conception of the particular sort of series (or genus) of which the Good is the first term and in which matter emerges as the last term of the series.

> One can grasp the necessity of evil in this way too. Since not only the Good exists, there must be the last end (*eschaton*) to the process of going out past it, or if one prefers to put it like this, going down or going away: and this last, after which nothing else can come into being, is evil. Now it is necessary that what comes after the First (*to meta to proton*) should exist, and therefore that the Last (*eschaton*) should exist; and this is matter, which possesses nothing at all of the Good. And in this way too evil is necessary. (7, 16–23)

The argument is extremely condensed and requires some development such as the following.[22] There is first the requirement that there be, not only the absolute Good, but also something "that comes after it." We can explain this requirement in terms of the nature of the Good, which, in virtue of its goodness, will produce something else. The reason for this is Plotinus's view that goodness is not jealous: what is good gives of its goodness to others. The absolute Good will thus produce something else, first Intellect and then Soul. Intellect is the expression, in a determinate unified multiplicity, of the infinite goodness of the One. Soul, in turn, is the expression, at a greater degree of articulation, of Intellect. No evil, as we have seen above, is to be found at any of these stages of the fecundity of the Good. However, the series of realities produced by the Good must be finite (I return shortly to this important claim). If the series were infinite, then one good thing would produce another good, which, in being good, would produce yet another good thing, and so on to infinity. But if the series is finite, then the last term can have nothing of goodness in it, or else it, too, would produce in turn something else, and so the series would become infinite. However, since the series is finite ("there must be the last"), the last term can have no goodness in it: it is the absolute evil that is matter.

The crucial point here, if one stays within the general metaphysical context of Platonism, is, I believe, the idea that the series of things produced by the Good is finite: if this point is admitted, then it follows that the Good produces matter and that matter is absolute evil. Why, then, must the series be finite? Perhaps a first answer to this question would be that an infinite series is theoretically possible, but not a given: what is given is the material world, which is the end of the productivity of the Good. Indeed Plotinus very probably assumes that the material world is, in fact, the end-limit of the productivity of the

22 For a more detailed analysis see O'Meara, *Metaphysics of Evil*, 180–182.

Good. However, it might also be suggested that an infinite series in the productivity of the Good is not even theoretically possible. Plotinus suggests, in the passage quoted above, that since something comes after the First, then there *must* be a last term. The fact, then, that things come after the First, being produced by it, seems to entail that there must necessarily be a last term to the series. But why?

Plotinus does not explain this, as far as I know. One might suggest that what comes from the infinite power of the Good is a finite expression of this power. The finitude of this expressed power, one might think, must somehow imply a finitude in the series of things it produces. The powers which come from the One are Intellect and Soul. But why does the series of powers not carry on beyond Intellect and Soul? One might imagine that there could be further stages in the expression of the power of the One. Thus we still have not reached an answer to our question. Perhaps some progress might be made if we note that Intellect and Soul are true productive causes, being characterized by intelligence and goodness. Plotinus does not seem to think that the range of causes *of this sort* extends beyond, or includes more than Intellect and Soul. Perhaps, given the nature of such causes, as rational beings, it cannot: there are no other productive causes, expressions of the power of the One, than Intellect and Soul. What comes after them, matter, deprived as it is of all goodness and intelligence, is not a cause of this sort (see below, section 2.4). It therefore lacks all productive power[23] and is the last product of higher realities, Intellect and Soul.

2.3. Problem 3

In describing the productive series going from the Good to its last term, the sterility of matter, it is tempting to speak of the middle terms of the series as "lesser goods." Might we then speak of "degrees" of goodness, in a hierarchy of goodness? Might the series be conceived,

23 See Plotinus, *Ennead* II, 9, 8, 21–25.

then, as ranging between two extremes, the absolute Good and matter, with intermediate stages in which shades of goodness and evil gradually change proportions such that evil becomes more and more important in the mix and goodness less and less present? Against this way of describing the series, however, stands Plotinus's Platonist view that there is no evil in "the divine," no evil, therefore, in the upper reaches of the series going from the One down to Intellect and Soul. It thus appears that things can be determinate, limited expressions of the absolute Good, without being evil. If evil is the "absence" of the good, this absence does not consist in the fact that some determinate limited thing is just what it is, and is not, or does not have, something else. I think then that we can say that Plotinus distinguishes between the fact of limitation, as being part of what it is to be a determinate nature, and the state of being evil, due to an absence or privation of the good.[24] Plotinus makes the point in his criticism of Gnosticism in *Ennead* II, 9:

> Nor should they [the Gnostics] be ready with censure [of this material world], demanding that this world should differ in no way from the higher one, nor should they consider evil as nothing else than a falling short (*to endeesteron*) in wisdom, and a lesser good, continually diminishing. As if one were to say that [in the material world] the growth-principle is evil because it is not sense-perception, and sense-perception [evil] because it is not reason. Otherwise, they will be compelled to say that there are evils in the higher world too: for there Soul is inferior to Intellect, and Intellect is lesser than another [the One]. (13, 26–33)

To be a lesser good is not necessarily to include evil. Evil does not appear with the emergence of lesser goods; evil is not a diminution of

24 On the distinction between limitation and privation see the chapters by Andrew Chignell and Samuel Newlands in the present volume.

the Good.[25] Interestingly, Plotinus applies this not only to his transcendent divine principles, Intellect and Soul, but also to the material world: things have their own determinate natures and as such are good. If they are lesser goods, in a hierarchy of the good, they do not for this reason contain evil.[26]

The idea that evil is not simply a lessening of the Good can apply, as we see, not only to transcendent reality but also to the material world. A mere lessening of the Good does not suffice as an explanation of the emergence of evil. Evil does not seem to be a matter of there being first lesser goods and then even lesser goods (= more and more evil), the series eventually petering out with no good left (= absolute evil). This point might help shed light on why Plotinus's explanation of evil is not "top-down" (degrees of lessening goods) but "bottom-up": evil first emerges at the end, as the total absence of good that is matter, which then affects higher things, bodies and souls, which in their nature, as lesser goods, need not be evil.

2.4. Problem 4

How then does matter, as absolute evil, affect higher realities so that they become secondary evils? The question brings us to a further problem—and objection—to Plotinus's theory of evil. If matter is absolute evil, in being bereft of any form, property, or determination, how could it possibly have any causal role in bringing about secondary evils? What has no qualities can surely do nothing.

Although Plotinus sometimes speaks of the "nature" of evil, or matter, this is a manner of speaking (3, 17). For having a nature means

25 In *Ennead* III, 2, 5, 25–32 we read: "In general, we must define evil as a falling short (*elleipsis*) of good here below, because the good is in something else. This something else, then, in which the good is, since it is other than the good, produces the falling short; for it is not good." The "something else" must be matter, which is the cause of deficiency in the material world.

26 I, 8, 5, 6–8; see also III, 2, 3, 25–41.

having a form, a determinate structure, which is not the case of matter. So also, if Plotinus speaks of matter as the primary "principle" (*archê*) or "cause" (*aitia*) of evils in other things, then this also must be a manner of speaking. For causes are such in terms of their goodness and rationality (again an idea derived from Plato[27]), which means that matter, deprived of all goodness and rationality, is not strictly speaking a cause, or rather it is not a cause in the way that the One, Intellect, and Soul are causes.[28] But it does, in another way, have an influence on bodies and on souls and can make them evil. To describe this in more detail, it might be better to take separately each of these two areas in which matter has an influence.

(a) Bodies come to be against the background of matter. They are forms (*logoi*) transmitted by soul, but these forms, not determining a stable substrate, exist as evanescent bundles permanently subject to change, disorder, conflict, dispersion, destruction:

> But if one considers that things external to the soul are evils, illness or poverty for instance, how will one trace them back to the nature of matter? Illness is defect and excess of material bodies which do not keep order and measure; ugliness is matter not mastered by form; poverty is lack and privation of things which we need because of the matter with which we are coupled, whose very nature is to be need.[29]

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27 See Plato, *Phaedo* 97cd; the cosmology of Plato's *Timaeus* begins (29e–30b) with causes relating to intelligence and goodness (the divine demiurge or intelligence, the good, the best model), which are later contrasted (47e–48a) with a very different constitutive factor in the universe, "necessity," with which Plotinus identifies matter (above, p.142).

28 Opsomer, *Problems with Plotinus' Theory*, 172, 174, quite inappropriately expects matter to function as an (Aristotelian) efficient or formal cause. Brisson speaks of matter's "counter-causality" on p. 174 of Luc Brisson, "The Question of Evil in the World in Plotinus," in *Fate, Providence and Moral Responsibility in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought*, edited by Pieter d'Hoine and Gerd van Riel (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014), 171–186.

29 I, 8, 5, 19–26; see also 8, 18–28.

From the point of view of souls, however, physical evils are not evils in a moral sense, since they cannot affect what makes for a good life, as Plotinus understands this.[30]

(b) Souls present a situation different from that of bodies. Souls are causes in the proper sense: they can act independently, rationally, and out of goodness. If, however, they become evil, morally evil, through the influence of matter, then it looks like a series of unacceptable consequences must follow, consequences which are pointed out by Proclus:[31] souls lose their independence and their responsibility for their actions; and they become subject (although they are superior and true causes) to the inferior, irrational, and evil cause that is matter. Plotinus himself cannot accept such consequences, and yet his theory of primary and secondary evil does seem to require that souls be made evil by matter. How then do souls become morally evil, and what role does matter play in this?

A first point that Plotinus stresses in *Ennead* I, 8 is that soul becomes morally evil when (and only when) it comes into relation with body and through body with matter. The presence of matter is a necessary condition for the arising of moral evil in the soul; once turned away from matter and toward itself, toward Intellect and the One, soul will escape evil.

Furthermore, not all of soul becomes evil, only its lower parts. Both this and the first point are made in the following passage:

> Which, then, is the evil soul? . . . the irrational part (*tou alogou . . . eidous*) of the soul which is receptive of evil, that is of unmeasuredness and excess and defect, from which come unrestrained wickedness and cowardice and all the rest of soul's evil, involuntary affections which produce false opinions . . . But what is it which produces this evil and how are you going to trace it back

30 See III, 2, 5, 6; 6, 1–9; I, 4, 5–6.

31 Proclus, *On the Existence of Evils*, chap. 33.

> to the source (*archê*) and cause (*aitia*) of evil which you have just described? First of all, this kind of soul is not outside matter or by itself. So it is mixed with unmeasuredness and without a share in the form which brings order and reduces to measure, since it is mixed in with body which has matter. And then [soul's] reasoning part (*to logizomenon*), if that is damaged, is hindered in its seeing by the passions and by being darkened by matter, and inclined to matter, and altogether by looking towards becoming, not being; and the principle of becoming is the nature of matter, which is so evil that it infects (*anapimplanai*)[32] with its own evil that which is not in it but only directs its gaze to it. (4, 6–22)

What becomes evil in soul is its lower part, the irrational part that mixes with body and has to do in this way with the unmeasuredness of matter. The involuntary unmeasured affects that arise in this part of the soul express themselves as various vices and can also affect soul's judgements and lead to false opinions. Thus the reasoning part of soul, when soul relates to body, can be hindered by irrational affects and can even be blinded, so to speak, by the indeterminateness of matter—not a possible object of thought—if it looks in that direction.

More generally, due to its indeterminateness, matter restricts the extent to which soul can express its goodness in the world:

> There are many powers of soul . . . and matter is there . . . matter spreads itself out under soul and is illumined, and cannot grasp the source from which its light comes . . . Matter darkens the illumination, the light from that source, by mixture with itself, and weakens it by itself offering it the opportunity of generation and the reason for coming to matter; for it would not have come to what was not present. This is the fall of the soul, to come in this way to matter and

32 See also 8, 16. The expression comes from Plato, *Phaedo* 67a.

> to become weak, because all its powers do not come into action; matter hinders them from coming by occupying the place which soul holds and producing a kind of cramped condition and making evil what it has got hold of by a sort of theft—unless soul manages to escape back to its higher state. So matter is the cause of the soul's weakness and vice: it is then itself evil before soul and is primary evil. (14, 34–51)

Plotinus's argument is thus that soul does not become evil in and from itself: it is only in coming into relation with matter that moral evil arises in souls. Matter is therefore presupposed by moral evil: it is a cause of moral evil, not a consequence. Furthermore, not all of soul becomes evil, only its lower irrational presence in the body and the opinions that can arise in its thinking when hindered by irrational affects or blinded by indeterminateness. More generally, matter, due to its indeterminateness, has a restricting effect on the expression of soul's causality. The higher reaches of soul, soul in itself, and in its life directed to Intellect and the One do not acquire moral evil.

If Plotinus attempts in this way to avoid making soul the cause of its moral evil, it might seem that there is a danger that this will lead to another dualism, similar to Manichean dualism in the sense that there will be two souls in us, one, the higher, the divine, pure soul (our true self) and another, the lower, sinning soul. However, I think that Plotinus can avoid this consequence to the extent that he insists on the continuity of soul, which reaches from the divine down to the body,[33] and on the "mobility" of the self, which can move over the range covered by soul, in relation to the things which interest "us," the things on which "we" focus our lives and which are important to us.[34] We cannot therefore ignore the moral evils that might arise in our lower passions

33 See *Ennead* V, 2, 1, 22–27.

34 On the self in Plotinus see Paulina Remes, *Plotinus on Self. The Philosophy of the "We"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

and opinions, as if they were of concern to someone else. They arise because we, as soul, allow them to arise; they need not arise in our life in the body. If then the presence of matter is a necessary condition for the emergence of moral evils, it does not seem to be a sufficient condition:[35] we must allow ourselves to be affected and blinded in our life with the body.

In another treatise, *Ennead* III, 2, Plotinus suggests that this can happen in stages, starting with a slight change which then can lead to greater decline:

> Living beings which have self-determined movement (*kinêsin autexousion*) may incline sometimes to what is better, sometimes to what is worse. It is probably not worth enquiring into the reason for this self-caused turning towards the worse. For a small change, when it happens at the beginning, by progressing, can become greater and so make the fault continually larger. And body is with [soul] and necessarily desire. And the first turn, what happens in a moment, if it is overlooked and not immediately corrected, even produces a choice (*hairesis*) of that to which one has fallen. (4, 36–44)

In soul's life in the body, a slight inclination to the inferior, if not checked, can develop into a choice for what is worse, the passions and desires that come with body and which bring the unmeasuredness that originates in matter.

2.5. Problem 5

A final problem might be recalled here, one that has been noted at the beginning of the sketch given above of Plotinus's theory of evil: Does Plotinus, in dealing with the question of the origin of evils, make the

35 The distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions has been introduced in relation to Plotinus's theory of evil by O'Brien, "Plotinus on Evil."

unfounded assumption that there is some one nature, common in some way to various evils, "Evil"? Does he slip, as I have expressed it, from a grammatical to a metaphysical singular?

In seeking to say what evil is, Plotinus, as we have seen, elaborates a "notion" of evil on the basis of negations of certain properties associated with goodness. It is a knowledge of goodness that produces, by negation, a concept of evil. The negated properties could be thought to relate to different things in different ways, and thus they need not necessarily belong in the absolute to one nature. However, it turns out that in Plotinus's metaphysical universe there exists a nature whose very "nature" is characterized by all of these negated properties, without qualification or restriction. There exists a reality which corresponds unqualifiedly to our conception of evil. Plotinus does not confuse the conception of evil with a reality which is evil; he does not slide from a grammatical to an ontological singular. There are other natures, of souls and of bodies, which may correspond in limited, qualified, differentiated ways, to the negated properties constituting our conception of evil (e.g., bodies lacking measure in some respect). But in their natures they are good; evil seems to be something additional to their natures.

We might note finally that Plotinus distinguishes between different ways of knowing evil. Besides the conception of evil based on knowing the good and negating its properties, there is also, it appears, a direct experience of evil. This cannot be a knowing, since evil is not a determinate knowable object, but it is rather an assimilation of soul to matter: a blinding of soul, an immersion of soul in darkness, disorder, indeterminateness.[36] Plotinus seems to be convinced that there can be such an experience of absolute evil, which also makes itself felt, in various specifications, in the confusion and deficiencies of the material world. However such darkness is not dominant in our experience

36 See *Ennead* I, 8, 9, 14–26.

of the material world. In the magnificent image with which Plotinus finishes his treatise, the goodness, rationality, and beauty of the world is affirmed:

> But because of the power and nature of the good, evil is not only evil; since it must necessarily appear, it is bound in a sort of beautiful fetters, as some prisoners are in chains of gold, and hidden by them, so that though it is present it may not be seen by the gods, and humans may be able not always to look at evil, but even when they do look at it, may be in company with images of beauty to remind them. (15, 23–28)

3. Concluding Remarks

In modern discussions of the "problem of evil," it is sometimes assumed that this problem arises in connection with theodicy, as part of a philosophy of religion in which belief in the god of a revealed religion, usually Christianity, is thought to be confronted by various problems, such as the existence of evils. It is thought that faith in such a god calls for rational reconciliation with the fact of evil, or, on the contrary, that the fact of evil is incompatible with such a faith. However, the examples of Stoicism and Plotinus show that, historically, the problem of evil is not limited to the framework of rational reflection on a religious faith: it can be of a wider philosophical interest. Furthermore, the debates among ancient Greek philosophers were to have considerable influence on philosophies of religion, in their conception of god (as good, and not the cause of evil), and in their attempts to reconcile this conception with the existence of evils.

Quite apart from his historical importance in the evolution of the accounts of evil given in particular by Augustine and Proclus, Plotinus, I suggest, offers a theory of evil which is not only theoretically interesting, but also in some ways more appealing than other approaches to which I have alluded earlier. On the one hand, he avoids a radical

dualism, such as that of the Manicheans, according to which there are two independent principles, two gods, the principle of good and the principle of evil. On the other hand, the monism he proposes—that there is just one ultimate source of reality, the Good—does not entail a trivialization of evil, as if evils were, so to speak, just crumbs which fall from the table of life, shadows on the facade of being, as suggested in the explanation of evil given by Proclus. Evil is very much a reality, for Plotinus, with deleterious consequences for the world and for us. If it is assumed that we can only choose between radical dualism and a monism which effectively dismisses evil, then Plotinus provides an example that undermines this assumption.

If, in taking evil seriously, one wishes to avoid Manichean dualism, then it might seem that a monism such as that of Stoicism or of Christian theologians such as Origen and Augustine might be an option: evil is to be restricted to the moral domain and explained as arising in the free exercise of rational judgment. In the Gnostic and Christian view, this amounts to making *us* the sole causes of evil. This seems an inordinate burden for us to assume, all the more unreasonable in that our freedom of rational judgement is said to be given to us by God, in the knowledge that we can misuse it. But what can explain this misuse? It does not seem prima facie plausible that, bearing some responsibility for moral evil, we are the *only* sources of it. Other factors, outside us, must play a part, and they must also, in some sense, be evil. Is it plausible that, in this world and in this life which we must live, all is either good, or bad, or neither good nor bad? Plotinus's theory of evil may seem extreme (and his metaphysics exotic), but is it any more implausible than the theories which rejected it and replaced it in history?